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Centrists Might Be Moving Party Leaders

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As the role of moderates in both parties might be on the rise in the debate over gas prices, the early stages of detente could be forming between Senate Democratic and Republican leaders on how to at least proceed on the issue.

House and Senate coalitions of centrists that were formed to work on compromise plans on gas prices were built on growing frustration among the rank and file -- and voters -- over political gamesmanship employed by party leaders.

This might be leading to more access for these members to party leaders in the debate. House Speaker Pelosi met Tuesday with a group of oil-patch Democrats who recently voted against her "use-it-or-lose-it" plan targeting a lack of production on existing federal areas open for oil and gas production.

She met later in the day with a partially overlapping batch of Blue Dog Coalition members on how they could support a revamped use-it-or-lose-it package heading to the floor Thursday.

"I've seen a shift in leadership," said Texas Rep. Gene Green, who heads an informal batch of oil-patch Democrats and was among those who met with Pelosi Tuesday. "And I'd like to see even more of a shift."

Green said the concern from his group is how you define the requirement in the use-it-or-lose-it bill that oil companies have to be "diligently producing" their existing leases or lose out on getting new production leases.

"We're trying to define 'due diligence' so where it's just not open-ended so that it would reflect the market conditions at the time," Green said.

A Pelosi spokesman said lawmakers made suggestions for Thursday's bill at the oil-patch meeting and she "was very receptive to these suggestions and we're working with Chairman Rahall to see what changes can be made." Natural Resources Chairman Nick Rahall sponsored the use-it-or-lose-it bill, which failed to get the two-thirds support necessary under suspension of House rules just before lawmakers left for Independence Day recess. Most Republicans joined 19 Democrats in defeating it.

Oil-patch Democrats and Republicans have argued that companies would be foolish to sit on and not produce on leases when the price of oil is as high as it is, which is what Democrats are accusing them of doing in order to keep prices high.

Green's group is working on a plan that includes their use-it-or-lose-it codifications, as well as opening up additional areas to drill for oil and gas in federal waters and addressing excessive speculation in the oil futures market.

Green said the oil-patch Democrats back at the end of June decided to be "proactive instead of just voting 'no' " to energy bills their party leaders were espousing.

A slightly overlapping group of about two dozen rank-and-file House Democrats and Republicans gathered Monday night for an inaugural meeting intended to bypass party leaders and come up with a set of energy items that would also be framed around the idea of expanding areas in federal waters open for oil and gas drilling.

The goal of the effort -- led by Reps. Neil Abercrombie, D-Hawaii, and John Peterson, R-Pa. -- is to have a working draft of ideas to package together in one or multiple bills very quickly, possibly by the start of next week, Abercrombie said.

More than two-dozen members in the two parties are submitting proposals for consideration, which comes after a "wonderful meeting that contained not one rhetorical flourish, Abercrombie said. "It was a pleasure. It was legislators legislating. I haven't seen a lot of that lately."

In the Senate, a 10-person centrist group there is working toward agreeing to a framework of a bill and drafting it during the August break that would address oil, gas and renewable energy production, conservation, speculation and other issues.

Such efforts might be melting the ice between the two Senate party leaders.

A day after he rejected the notion of allowing Republicans to offer amendments to an upcoming market speculation bill that would increase offshore drilling and touch on other energy items, Senate Majority Leader Reid Tuesday left the door open for that possibility.

"If we get on the speculation bill, we'll take a look at ways to amend that," Reid said. One Republican aide noted that this is still a far cry from saying that he will actually allow amendments.

Senate Minority Leader McConnell said he was optimistic. "We are obviously going to insist on an open amendment process that gives everybody an

opportunity to have their say," McConnell said. "I'm optimistic that's what [Reid] has in mind anyway."

Reid said he wants to bring a speculation bill to the floor right after the Senate finishes debate on a global AIDS bill. "We hope to have a good, bipartisan bill on speculation in the next few days. We've worked hard on that and we're -- I think we're there," he said.

Senate Majority Whip Durbin Tuesday said Democrats hoped to have a speculation bill to put on the floor schedule by the end of that day. He said his bill -- which incorporates ideas from Sens. Carl Levin, D-Mich., and Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., and others -- will likely be used as the base text. "I think that's going to be a pretty common starting point," he said.

Senate Republicans have touted their broader energy package -- which includes speculation language but opens more federal waters to drilling and overturns a ban on producing Western oil shale. Democratic leaders continue to call on President Bush to release oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, an idea he dismissed Tuesday.

While House -- and perhaps Senate -- centrists have signaled they want to move ahead with a plan to expand offshore energy production, it might be too contentious of an issue even with the current concern over gas prices. "They're walking into an extremely sensitive area," Durbin said.